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Democrats Ready to Challenge Bush

By Thomas Ferraro

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Democratic leaders conferred on Friday about new and unexpected prospects for pushing their agenda thanks to the defection of a key Republican in the Senate that will shift power in the chamber to their party.

President Bush tried to play down the enormity of the change and signaled confidence in top aides who critics say failed to stop the defection of moderate Sen. James Jeffords of Vermont, who objected to Bush's conservative trend.

Yet the future of Bush's legislative agenda, including tackling energy shortages, education and health reform, promoting more conservative judicial appointments and reshaping national security with a missile defense system, was now in question.

Jeffords' defection, announced on Thursday, will change the balance of power in the Senate to 50 Democrats, 49 Republicans and one independent. Republicans control the House of Representatives, 221-210, with two independents and two vacant seats.

``The dynamics on the Hill change immediately," said Kim Wallace, chief political analyst at the Lehman Brothers investment bank. ``You return to shared power and have, at best, grudging partisan negotiations or return to an era of gridlock when you get nothing done.

``This can't be viewed as good for President Bush," Wallace said. ``Yet Democrats could be at risk if there is more gridlock and the public blames them for it."

Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle, in line to become the chamber's new majority leader, met with House Democratic leader Richard Gephardt as shell-shocked Republicans regrouped.

Daschle of South Dakota has said the first new piece of legislation he will bring to the floor when Democrats take control will be a long-stalled measure to establish a patients' bill of rights.

Assistant Senate Republican Leader Don Nickles reiterated on Friday he may try to muster a vote-blocking filibuster against the measure, maintaining it would raise health costs and force some companies to drop coverage of workers.

``I'm a reluctant warrior," said Nickles of Oklahoma. ``I want to pass a patients' bill of rights," but not this one.

An aide said Daschle would decide the lineup of other bills after Congress returns from its Memorial Day recess on June 4.

``When we get back, Senator Daschle will make the decisions after meeting with his chairmen, caucus and leadership," the aide said.

The shift in power prompted Rep. Christopher Cox of California, a conservative, to ask Bush to no longer consider him for a federal judgeship.

Figuring it would be difficult if not impossible to be confirmed as a judge by a Democratic-led Senate, Cox said he will instead ``redouble my efforts" as a lawmaker.

In the waning days of their Senate control, Republicans huddled over the final form of a tax reduction package -- a centerpiece of the Bush agenda -- with the Jeffords' case adding pressure to tend to the party's moderate wing.

Jeffords returned to Capitol Hill on Friday from Vermont and was warmly received by his staff. He has said he will leave the Republicans once the Senate has finished work on the tax bill and sent it to Bush for signing, or on June 5, whichever comes later.

POLITICAL MAELSTROM

The political maelstrom that has gripped Washington over the shift of power in the Senate is expected to die down in the next week as Congress takes a break and lawmakers go back to their home bases to reflect.

But discussion continued about who was responsible for allowing Jeffords to defect.

The New York Times said in an editorial that the White House ``troika" of Chief of Staff Andrew Card and top political and communications strategists Karl Rove and Karen Hughes deserved ``a major portion of the blame."

It said they must steer the administration, in which hard-line conservatives have a big influence, to the center.

Independent pollster John Zogby said: ``I think they need to lead from the center. To date, this administration has had a tin ear as to where the voters are."

The Barre-Montpelier Times Argus newspaper in Vermont quoted Jeffords as saying he had told the president he must be more open to centrists to avoid a re-election defeat.

On Capitol Hill, Senate Republican leader Trent Lott met on Friday with a half-dozen Republican moderates and agreed to let them join leadership meetings on a rotating basis.

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